

*Senate Select Committee on
Constitutional Amendment Implementation*

**Amendment No. 9
Class Size Reduction**

Background

The amendment was sponsored by Florida's Coalition to Reduce Class Size and was approved by the voters of Florida in November 2002.

On February 10, 2003, the Select Committee on Constitutional Amendment Implementation received testimony on this amendment.

The meeting began with comments from Congressman Kendrick Meek, Chairman of Florida's Coalition to Reduce Class Size.

Nancy Keenan, Education Policy Director of People for the American Way also spoke. This organization worked in conjunction with Florida's Coalition to Reduce Class Size to pass the amendment. A majority of the testimony and questions from the members were directed to Congressman Meek and Ms. Keenan surrounding implementation possibilities.

Patricia Levesque, Education Policy Coordinator for the Governor's Office of Policy and Budgeting gave a PowerPoint presentation on the Governor's implementation plan.

Also speaking at the meeting were: Jeanine Blomberg, Assistant Deputy Commissioner with the Department of Education; Wayne Blanton, Executive Director for the Florida School Boards Association who presented an implementation report; Joy Frank, Legislative Consultant & General Counsel for the Florida Association of District School Superintendents who also presented an implementation report; David Mosrie, Chief Executive Officer for the Florida Association of District School Superintendents; and

Marshall Ogletree, Legislative Advocate for the Florida Education Association who presented the FEA's policy position paper.

Copies of these presentations and handouts may be obtained from the Committee's web site at: www.flsenate.gov/sci

Questions and Issues

- How should districts be held accountable for new funds that may be designated for class size reduction?
- On what basis should average class size be calculated?
- What types of data on current class sizes and facility availability are currently being collected? How much will the program cost? What are the operational and capital funding needs?
- On what basis will funds be distributed? How should resources be provided to counties that have already addressed class sizes?
- What are the most efficient options for reaching the goals of the amendment? What options, other than building new facilities, are available to implement the amendment?
- How will the amendment affect the demand for teachers, and how should this demand be addressed?
- What should be included within the definition of a core curriculum?
- Can, or should, “choice” options, such as charter schools or magnet schools, be treated any differently from other public schools?

Principles and Findings

Class size reduction has been approved by the voters as a primary explicitly stated constitutional goal for Florida education. As a result, the accomplishment of this specific goal may have to take precedence over previous initiatives for the improvement of education.

Implementation should remain true to the spirit of the amendment. While clarity must be applied to various definitions within the amendment, language should be defined in a reasonable way that does not circumvent the goals of the amendment.

Funding should be based on well-researched, reliable data and an equitable allocation of resources.

Funding formulas should be fair to localities that have already used local resources to address class size.

School districts should be given appropriate funds and the flexibility to choose from among options to reduce class size, but then should be held strictly accountable for results.

School districts should be given incentives to achieve their class size reduction targets in an efficient manner.

Proposed Recommendations

During the scheduled phases of implementation and compliance, class size averages should be calculated on a district-wide basis and a reasonable level of capacity, based upon data collected through such mechanisms as the Florida Inventory of School Houses. Once the final scheduled targets are reached, consideration should be given as to how implementation might be reached on a class-by-class basis.

There are options, other than the construction of new facilities, which can be used to reduce class sizes in timely, efficient, and effective ways. These options should be established by the state and implemented through local control. Local school districts should be given incentives to minimize reliance on the construction of new facilities.

- Before embarking on expensive, and perhaps inefficient, capital outlay programs, alternative approaches to class size reduction should be evaluated and implemented wherever possible.
- These options should include at the minimum the following approaches: adjusting attendance boundaries, implementing limited use of double sessions, encouraging greater use of dual enrollment, and providing year round school scheduling.
- For local school districts that choose to implement the class size reduction requirement through the use of new facilities, the Legislature should establish a cost-sharing mechanism to assist local districts in the construction of those facilities.

Constitutional requirements for equity in funding must be maintained. Consequently, districts that reach required class size averages prior to the constitutional deadlines should not be penalized financially.

- Many districts have already made progress on reducing class sizes, and some have instituted local option taxes. The education financing formula should not penalize these districts for their previous efforts.

Although there may be compelling policy reasons for a liberal interpretation of terms such as “extracurricular classes,” the Legislature should not attempt to waive constitutional language through statute.

- For example, arguments were presented to the committee that Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes were unique and consequently should not be included in the class size calculation. These courses, while unique, are still tied to core curriculum requirements and do not appear to fit within the extracurricular class definition.

A strict system of accountability and enforcement must be in place to assure that districts are accomplishing the required class size goals.

- While local districts should be given discretion as to how class size goals can most efficiently and effectively be met, the state must have a strong role in assuring that the necessary outcomes are accomplished.